

BENEFICENT BRIGANDS



WHEN the little steamer made a wide sweep in the bay of Naples, industriously backed water, and came to a wheezy halt in its own wake, the boats from the various hotels surrounded it like a lot of animated beggars. The blue one with yellow rails and red cushions, a half-breeched boatman, and the sign Grand Hotel d'Europe wriggled to the gangway, and a woman of strong, determined mien boarded it after declining to pay tips. She was followed by another built in similar mold, and still others, until seven of them possessed all the seats of the rocking craft. Wildly pushing after them came a small man with clothes like the Sahara desert,—full of waste places—inside of which he was a mere oasis. Wrath and humility were intermingled in his looks, and so much baggage was perched, piled, and laid over him that he resembled a moving van in May. That was Henry Meek, victim of circumstances, called "Hennery" by his wife and "Hank" by his own friends.

Henry, by the grace of the boatman, was permitted to squat in the bow on top of the mountain of luggage which he had sweated through France and Italy, and now removed his hat, to the everlasting joy of the passengers for Capri, who leaned over the rail and made facetious remarks in many tongues. Neither the comments, the banana peel, nor the peanut shells that they threw at his shining dome provoked his wrath, and he was set down as a spiritless being without the saving grace of temper. No one realized that he was so accustomed to misery that he could bear with patience things that would have rendered Job a mighty peevish man.

As the boat landed at the foot of the lofty cliff on which the hotel perched, behind its flowered and arborescent terrace, he was surrendering himself to the melancholy relief of introspection; for he felt that the limit had been reached, and here in these lovely surroundings would rest the remains of Henry Meek. Rest was what he wanted more than all else. And, until this last unfortunate period, he could look back on a prosperous and well spent life.

IN Dubuque, Iowa (pronounced by Mrs. Henry as "Ioway"), he had gained and held for forty years the enviable credit of being the best natured and merriest man in town. Why, everybody knew "Hennery," or "Hank," who was such a "young dog" despite his sixty birthdays. He had been the lodge "sitter up" with the afflicted, the ready politician for ward campaigns, and the emergency comrade always ready to go fishing. His laugh had been contagious, and he weighed exactly two hundred pounds, with his hair included, on the slot machine scales where his solicitous wife had driven him on the day they sailed. Now he weighed a bare hundred and forty, was completely bald, and thought himself four inches shorter. His merriement had deserted him with the other embellishments, until he had forgotten how to laugh. He

BY ROY NORTON

Drawings by J. V. McFall

wished he had never set foot in Europe. He wished that the Ladies' Mutual Advancement Sorosis of Dubuque and the seven members he convoyed were—

"Hennery," a sharp voice broke in, "see that all the baggage gets taken!"

"Yes, and don't forget my parcels!" called another, while a third commanded him to bring the parasols. Then they all wanted something done,—wanted it in unison.

He tipped the boatmen and the porters, and then fidgeted nervously about while the seven members of the L. M. A. S. climbed the switchback paths on the face of the cliff. Loaded with smaller belongings, he followed; but found the hill hard. He gained the terrace carrying his hat in his teeth, a trick he had learned when his head got too hot and his hands were too full. He dropped despondently into a chair and resumed his review of all that had happened, while the hum of seven voices, all talking at once and each trying to speak the loudest, died away in the hotel corridors.

To the surprise of those lounging near him, he burst into muttered speech which died away until only his lips moved. Henry hadn't been a very good boy. He remembered several things he used to say in those far off years, and was repeating them now. He had come to this stage gradually. Once before, in Saint Peter's, he had been alone for a few minutes while the women immersed themselves in a strenuous argument backed up by Baedeker. Then, as a man in desperation, Henry had contemplated prayer; but had felt his lack of practice, and, as he bitterly said to himself, was afraid it wouldn't do any good because he didn't think he had "much of a pull with the Lord nohow."

WHEN he started this trip the six husbands of the six other ladies of the L. M. A. S. had been with them. Henry was glad, because they were friends of his and all good fellows. Oh, they were "a bunch of good boys all right!" He could see that now. The youngest of the "boys" was about his own age. Some were older, until they furtively escaped surveillance and made excursions to such charming cafés as the Folies-Bergère, where they became young again,—amazingly young. On most of these occasions Henry Meek was left to amuse the women in the hotel or to escort them to some lecture on "The Esoteric Value of the Renaissance in Art and Literature." So while the others rejuvenated he grew older. Sometimes, indeed most always, he gained the scorn and contumely of the apostles of advancement on these delightful treats. He had such an unpleasant habit of falling fast asleep and snoring aloud. His ribs were sore from much

prodding, notwithstanding the fact that in these slumbrous lapses from high art he appeared to settle into himself until he was incased in his own fat.

He wondered now why he had not foreseen the end. He shifted in his seat on the terrace and called for the waiter. He pantomimed; he gesticulated; he consulted a dictionary,—and the waiter with a slow smile disappeared.

Henry had become accustomed to the courier English in all these foreign lands, so that when he asked what time the train left for Rome and was politely told in reply, "Yes, it will go yesterday, if to-morrow is a very nice day," he evinced no surprise. He was resigned to almost anything now, from Mrs. Johnny's continual gushing to Mrs. Reber's domination. He wished the waiter would hurry, and was quite nervous when the latter appeared and turned the siphon into the other beverage, which he drank hastily before shooing the boy away. Under the clarifying influence of the draft he settled back into his seat and began tallying up the circumstances that had brought him to his present distress.

IT was after they had visited Westminster Abbey in London, ridden on a Strand omnibus, and stared at "The Old Curiosity Shop," that Pilkington—"Good Old Pilk"—had received the cablegram calling him back to his bank, and had asked him to do what he could for Mrs. Pilkington. Pilk did hate to rob her of her long cherished foreign trip! Naturally he had agreed. That made one.

Mrs. Biggs was left in his care in Paris when Biggs got next to that "little manufacturing deal over in Birmingham," which required his presence and the temporary—only temporary, mind you—abandonment of his share of the trip. Oh, Biggs would join them "later"; but the clerk at Cook's had told him how Biggs turned in the southern coupons of his ticket and thereby burned many bad bridges. The clerk had been sorry that Mr. Biggs couldn't go along. So had Henry. However, that made two.

When Johnny Parslow was taken ill in Amsterdam,—nothing serious,—"Maw" had insisted on Mrs. Johnny's staying right with the party. She was sure it wouldn't be a bit of bother for Hennery to look after her. So Mrs. Johnny came while her husband recovered his health at various seaside resorts where there was always a little something doing to help a sick man. That made three.

George Osgood decided to stay with Johnny. Thought Johnny needed him. Was quite sure it was better for some one to be with Johnny. Knew it would never do to leave Johnny alone. Maybe Johnny would suffer. Thinking back over it, on the terrace, Henry was astonished at the solicitude George entertained for Johnny; but he had remained, although Mrs. George came right on with the others. That made four.

But Dick Harrell and Bill Reber had played him the unforgivable trick. What a nerve they had



He Gained the Terrace Carrying His Hat in His Mouth.

after all, to delay their departure from Paris until escorting their wives for them, Henry had got as far as Marseilles, and then to send that telegram,—the telegram that said, "We've decided to stay in Paris until you return. It certainly looks good to us. Take good care of the ladies. Hope you have a real nice time. Ta, ta!"

So there they were,—six of them, and "Maw" made seven! Lodge duties and being a town philanthropist were soft snaps compared with being male protector and courier general for such a party. Twice since leaving Marseilles he had contemplated suicide; but hadn't found time,—there was too much luggage to watch and too many lost things to find.

HENRY said more bad things under his breath and looked around for the waiter. He was interrupted in his welcome solitude by Mrs. Pilkington, who wanted him to come right in and help her unlock her trunk, and Mrs. Osgood, who wanted him to make the maid servant in this outlandish country understand that when she asked for hot water she didn't want six bottles of horrid, loathsome American beer. It was a downright insult to one who had been four times president of the Band of Hope!

Henry resumed his air of extreme humbleness and accompanied them to the hotel, where he endeavored to adjust all matters. In the hallway he found Mrs. Reber trying to talk to the courier. She had brought this party here, she had, because some one told her there were ancient Roman baths near Sorrento, and also that the famous caves of the Sirens were still here. Henry slipped past on his tiptoes to avoid being dragged into the conversation. He didn't care much for ruined baths. He preferred the modern American kind, which he had found rarely, regretted in tubbing England, longed for in tubless France, and sought in bathless Naples; but the caves of the Sirens were about the limit. The only kind of siren he cared anything about was the one on a homebound steamer. Its voice would be heavenly.

"Here you, Hennery!" his wife's voice called. "Hurry up and get your breakfast! We're going to Pompeii, and the carriages are waiting!"

The meal was the best he had found in Italy, and he was hungry; but he was compelled to rush through with it and take his place beside the driver on the uncomfortable narrow box. There wasn't room inside with the cameras and other paraphernalia. Anyhow, there was one satisfaction: the driver couldn't talk. He followed the party through the excavated streets, and tried to explain why some of the houses were closed to the public. Mrs. Reber learned the reasons from the guide, who spoke a mixture of cockney English and bad Italian. She said it was shameful. She didn't think much of the inhabitants of Pompeii, and if any of them were there now she would tell them what she thought of them. There were many works of art in the

ancient ruins which the L.M.A.S. thought needed Comstocking. Henry was fiendishly delighted. He hoped Vesuvius would erupt while they were there. He was ready to become an ancient ruin at any time. He was almost that now.

ON the return he came to a desperate decision. He would run away! So that night after the women had wrangled with carriage drivers because Hennery was "so easy going," had declined *pourboires* for macaroni, centissimi for starving families, and a few soldi with which to drink the honorable party's health, they had in their midst a very determined man. They had been given a private dining room, free of extra charge, after their first meal. The proprietor was afraid the other guests would leave; but the noise of seven women all discussing ancient architecture at once no longer worried Henry. He thought to himself how restful and quiet a railway station, with its clanging bells, escaping steam, and grinding airbrakes, would seem when he could reach one.

The after dinner concert on the terrace gave him his opportunity. Between the desperately struggling orchestra and the conversation, running neck and neck, the sound of Henry's feet crunching over the gravel paths was drowned. He bribed the concierge to silence, and passed out between the high walls whose hoary sides had been eroded by many centuries. He walked through the Piazza d'Tasso, where the marble statue of the poet who met his death through the fair sex looked down at him pityingly, and on toward Capo di Monti beyond the ravines where the dwarfs lurk, and beneath the ruined castle where ghosts hold silent revel. He rather liked silent ghosts, and dwarfs suggested Rip Van Winkle's friends who knew how to give a man uninterrupted sleep. He felt relieved and joyous. He thought he should walk forever; but something happened to prevent.

It was a hand deftly placed over his mouth from behind, while others gently but firmly pinioned his arms to his sides. The voice of a man who had learned English while tamping ties on the Lackawanna railway admonished him to silence. Henry nodded acquiescence. He proved a most singular prisoner. He seemed happy and content, like the man in the comic opera who became "a housemaid somewhere down in Kent." They unloosed him and permitted him to speak.

"See here, Brig," he said familiarly, "I'm glad I met you."

The brigand smiled, but tried to look fierce.

"You're one of these Mussolino sort of boys, aren't you?"

The brigand was flattered and bowed very deeply. Henry passed round the cigars, and was thoughtfully confidential. He removed his hat to think better; which was a mistake, for in the flare of a match in the languid Italian night his captor thought he had secured no less a prize than the president of an American trust and was loath to part company with him, or risk talk. Henry in the meantime was seriously contemplating the life of a brigand, and wondered how he would look in a pair of velvet breeches and a hat with a dinky little feather.

It has never been plainly told what followed in the way of conversation; for the habits of silence acquired by Henry Meek have never left him, and he remains to this day a man with the taciturnity of a Mormon elder. It is certain, however, that he escaped and returned to his hotel, with several men respectfully—nay, deferentially—escorting him. Whether this meeting in the night had anything to do with the extra candles that were found burning before the shrine in the corner of the wall above the old palazzo is not more certainly known. It may have been a miracle, because little less could account for a full dozen wax lengths in a country where they are so dear.

The mild mannered Mr. Meek got back in time to superintend the filling of seven hot water bags whose stoppers the maid did not understand, and retired quite se-

renely. His own feet were not suffering, although for many days they had been cold.

AT the breakfast table the following morning he waited for a lull, and then declared he didn't want to see the Tarantella dance. The women all sat up and took notice. They had never heard of it before. He went on to say that he was not interested in any old poetical thing that had survived centuries. Modern stuff was good enough for him. Why, he had been assured that the peasants danced it just the same as when old Tiberius lived in Sorrento. That showed it was no good. They inundated him with questions, and at length Mrs. Reber calmly announced that they would certainly go and see it that evening. Henry looked at his plate and objected strenuously. He advised them not to. Oh yes, he admitted, it was not improper. Yes, lots of ladies went to see it. No, it wasn't expensive. No, there was no objection save that they would have to walk. Yes, he knew the place; but—oh, hang it all! this poetry-of-motion stunt didn't appeal to him. They fell upon him until he was properly suppressed and resumed his accustomed melancholy. His objections had merely strengthened their resolutions.

He was compelled to pilot them through the narrow streets and point out the house where it was always held, so they could learn exactly how to get there. They treated him with immense dignity when in the evening he was taken with cramps and declared he would have to remain in his room. For once he was firm and insisted on "Maw" remaining with him; but the other six women went, while Mrs. Meek bemoaned her fate at home. Henry seemed to recover miraculously as the evening wore away, and once his wife surprised him humming a song; but at sight of her questioning glance he changed the tune to hollow groans of misery. He enjoyed a splendid night's rest, and appeared fresh and complacent when he entered the thick walled private dining room the next morning.

BOTH Henry and Mrs. Meek were surprised to find no one there; Henry palpably so. In the unusual stillness they could even hear birds singing outside the window. They had not known before that there were birds in Italy, nor had opportunity to hear them. As the day wore on they were further surprised by the non-appearance of any of their traveling companions, whom they had thought absent on some nearby excursion. Mrs. Meek was real angry at being left behind. Henry didn't seem to care. Later he volunteered to make inquiries, and then there was a general alarm, and the hotel was in a turmoil, with running porters, distressed proprietors, and visiting officials. The women of the party had not returned on the previous night.

The carabinieri learned that Henry had been misinformed and that no Tarantella dance had ever

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He Followed a Beclouked Figure to a Wine Shop.

The Beneficent Brigands

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been given in the house pointed out, nor had the women been there, was asserted by those who occupied it. Sorrento fairly seethed with excitement; but it was that kind of seething which was invisible. The loafers in the streets still loafed, the fishermen in the bay still fished, and the wood inlayers in the shops still inlaid; but there was no topic of conversation save the disappearance of the Americans. The carabinieri rode frantically everywhere; but learned nothing. Mrs. Meek wrung her hands until they were unusually red, and Hennerly seemed wrapped in unliftable gloom. That night, however, he received a note which offered some explanation. It read:

"VERY RESPECTED SIGNOR:—We have seen American women for which you much a look. We take a seex t'ousand dollaire for de lot. Got-a dem hide in good-a cave. Eef not money got by t'ree night, we send-a you seex sets of ears. Eef you tell-a de carabinieri, we kill-a dis seex Americane signora and sure kill-a you. You get-a de money. PRESTO! Breeng heem along to Castellamare where man meet you in piazza t'ree night off."

It was signed with a skull and crossbones, three black hands, and something that looked like a cheese, but was probably intended for a blackjack sort of thing. Henry was very much worried, and discussed it with his wife and the hotel proprietor. The latter favored giving it to the officials; but Mrs. Meek thought differently, thereby agreeing with Henry. "Maw" thought the women would look shocking without any ears, and wept convulsively. So Henry reluctantly acceded to the terms of the note, his wife's persuasions, and his own inclinations. He wired to each one of the women's husbands, and awaited replies with much anxiety.

The carabinieri found him quite useless in their search, although he advised them to hurry it up, as he was afraid something would happen to his charges unless they were rescued, and quite often he accompanied them to the hills back of the town; but search as they would the second day passed without results. The affair had been reported to the Government, which at once hurried special detachments of soldiers to the scene, and it seemed that every spot in the nearer hills had been trampled over by armed and spurred men and every olive terrace overrun. As far away as lone Deserto on the peak and the monastery on its flank inquiries had been made; but without learning anything of the missing women. They were gone as completely as if destroyed.

THE newspapers of Europe took it complacently, for a few Americans more or less didn't matter much; but the journals of

America fumed and boiled with great headlines, and one, "The Patriot" of New York, had long alleged interviews "by direct cable," together with six pictures "taken on the scene"—which suggested the environs of Colorado Springs. It also had halftones of all the women, in which each appeared young and charming and quite like some one no one had ever seen before. Mr. Meek was bombarded with telegrams and cables; but those which interested him most were slow in coming. The first was from Pilkington,—"Good old Pilk,"—and read:

"Times pretty hard; but herewith cable my share. Get her out quick. Presume other boys paying for theirs."

The next to come was from George Osgood and Johnny Parslow, who, it appeared, had gone from Amsterdam to Paris, inasmuch as it was sent from the race course at Longchamps and read:

"Come high; but must have them. Are mailing money; but save ears if you've got the cash. We don't want job lots or selling platers returned. Must trot them back warranted sound and unblemished."

Biggs, it appeared, was also in Paris; but replied separately:

"Can't you get cut rate on wholesale deal like this? Offer five hundred cash and note for thirty days at six per cent. I'm trifle short; but am wiring that sum. Mailing balance for emergency, including two hundred counterfeit which I've been handed since arrival."

But again it was Dick Harrell and Bill Reber that outdid the others in hilarity and regarded it as a joke. The wire said:

"Sure, Hank. Pay if you have to. Mailing check on Morgan Harjes bank in Paris, which hope you'll have no trouble cashing. If so, draw on us. Save ears at all costs; but offer kidnappers two thousand more to keep them six weeks longer. We'll stand expense. Having perfectly lovely time. Felicite brigands. Tell them they're good kids, and we hope they get along."

This was followed by a joint wire signed by all "the boys" save Pilkington, which advised: "Be sure and give us two days' warning when party starts for Paris. Remember we're best friends you've got on earth; so treat this strictly confidential. We'll never lose opportunity to help you out. On the strict Q. T., remember. Don't forget."

HENRY went out on the terrace overlooking the bay, and reread the last message, tore it into very fine shreds, and grinned slowly as the pieces fluttered down the face of the cliff. The next night, muffled like a bandit, with his

hat over his eyes, and in a closed carriage, he drove to Castellamare, the fishing village by the sea, where, a few blocks from the Piazza, he bade his driver wait. He gained the rendezvous without attracting attention. A warning whisper caught his ears, a furtive beckoning his glance, and he followed a be-cloaked figure to a wineshop, in the rear of which they found seclusion. They leaned confidentially over a wine stained, crumb laden table, which was ancient enough to be as rickety as most anything European.

The intermediary spoke familiar English, and proved to be none other than the man that had held Henry up several nights before. He appeared careworn and weak from loss of sleep, fear of the carabinieri, and other details of responsibility. His hands trembled when he counted the money Henry doled out, which amounted to just half the sum demanded. They argued long and strenuously over terms; but the bandit remained obdurate. He would make only one concession: he would take no less than a thousand each for all except Mrs. Reber. Her he was willing to part from at half price, and finally agreed to let her go for nothing. On these conditions they closed, and Henry paid over the rest of the money in cash, two hundred counterfeit included, and retained only the thousand-dollar check, which, with a slow grin, he placed in his inside pocket.

"You don't like the big woman?" he asked with much sympathy.

The kidnapper's hands waved a tremolo in the air, his eyes rolled, and the rings in his ears shook like monastery bells on a fête day. "Ah," he spluttered, "she is one terrible woman who talk-talk-talk—all the time! *Per Bacco!* I thees money have earned. I not keep t'ree day more for ten t'ousand!"

Overcome by his emotions, the careworn brigand leaned over the table with great sobs of relief, in which attitude Henry left him and passed through the wineshop, gaily whistling. "He walked right in and he turned around and he walked right out again." He chortled to himself on the way back to Sorrento, and occasionally patted the pocket wherein rested the thousand he had held out; nor did he assume his habitual air of melancholy until his hotel was in sight.

AT three o'clock in the morning following that same eventful night, the concierge of the Grand Hotel d'Europe opened his portals, and in stupefied amazement admitted the women that had been missing. The guests were aroused. The ransomed ones took turns in kissing Mrs. Meek, and threatened to subject Hennerly to some such embarrassing ordeal, which he skilfully eluded by barricading himself in a corner behind a table. They tried to tell all that had happened, in chorus, from which it might be gathered that they had suffered a most terrifying ordeal.

They had sought the house of the Tarantella; but in the darkness of the walled-in street had been deftly captured despite their struggles and carted away in two closed vehicles between men who would not even permit them to talk. They had ridden for hours, and just at dawn were bundled into something that looked like a ruined castle. Their captors were terrible creatures with red sashes and knives, and fed them on nothing but garlic. A woman waited on them who couldn't understand anything, not even Mrs. Reber's French. But Mrs. Reber and some of the others had told their jailors what they thought of them. Yes, they had, several times! They would know better the next time, those dreadful brigands would, when the President of the United States sent a warship right over to blow Italy out of the water! How their poor, dear husbands must have suffered! They would leave this horrid country by the very first boat that went to Naples! Yes, they would!

Then they each called for telegraph blanks and sent messages. Some of them required two whole pages. They were sent "collect." They spared Henry the trouble of wiring the time of their departure, because each explained at length just how she would come and just how she was to be met in Paris. All that Henry had to do was to suggest a few minor details that they overlooked, such as the time the trains would get in, and the stations at which they would land; but these of course were unimportant.

So in time they came to Paris, and were reunited with their husbands, who assured them they had been nearly distracted with anxiety, had suffered tortures through their absence, and would never let them away from sight again—never—no, never!

THE European trip of the L. M. A. S. was at an end. They hastened across the Channel to London, and thence to Queenstown, where they boarded the big Carmania. They sailed gaily away without accident—save this:

After the boat had been out for three hours, they discovered that one of their party was missing. Before they could alarm the ship, they received a Marconigram which read:

"So sorry to have missed boat. Will follow later. Going back to Paris first to get thousand-dollar check cashed by Morgan Harjes. Take good care Mrs. Meek. Hope you have pleasant voyage. Ta, ta! So sorry!"

"HENNERLY." The worm had turned; but his accidental delay was accepted by all save the men who foregathered in the smoking room and underscored that part of the message referring to the check. They realized that they were paying for Hennerly's vacation. And then—gay old boys—they Marconied him several places to visit that are not prominently mentioned in Baedeker, and drank his health.

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